

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 979

CG 020 586

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TITLE Effects of Family Structure on Children's Self-Concepts.  
PUB DATE 18 Dec 87  
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (58th, Chicago, IL, May 8-10, 1986). For related document, see CG 020 587.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Age Differences; \*Family Structure; Nuclear Family; One Parent Family; Secondary Education; \*Secondary School Students; \*Self Concept; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Sex Differences; Stepfamily

## ABSTRACT

The number of nontraditional families, including single-parent families and stepfamilies, in America has been steadily increasing. This study was conducted to examine the effects of family structure (intact, stepparent, and single-parent) on children's self-concepts using Parish and Parish's Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC). The PAIC and a demographic questionnaire were completed by 199 students in grades 7 through 12 attending a university-related laboratory school. Twenty-four students were from stepfamilies, 32 were from single-parent families, and 143 were from intact families. The results revealed no statistically significant differences in how the children in the three different family structures perceived themselves. Although a trend was noted for students from stepfamilies to check fewer positive adjectives on the PAIC, their means did not differ significantly (.05 level) from the means of children from single-parent or intact families. There were no significant differences by sex for the number of positive adjectives checked by respondents. A difference was found as a function of grade level, with the mean number of positive adjectives checked being lowest for students in grades 9 and 10. (NB)

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Effects of Family Structure

Effects of Family Structure on Children's Self-Concepts

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Running Head: EFFECTS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

Date Submitted: December 18, 1987

ED291979

CG 020586

Abstract

This study examined the effects of family structure (intact, stepparent, and single-parent) on children's self-concepts using Parish & Parish's Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC). One hundred and ninety nine (199) students in grades 7 through 12 participated. Although a trend was noted for students from stepfamilies to check fewer positive adjectives, they did not differ significantly (.05 level) from the means of children from single-parent or intact families.

Effects of Family Structure  
On Children's Self-Concepts

American society is experiencing many changes in the make-up of family compositions. The number of nontraditional families, which include single-parent families and stepfamilies, has been steadily increasing over the years (Touliatos & Lindholm, 1980). In a 1979 survey, Glick indicated that the number of children under 18 years of age, who reside with only one parent, has doubled since 1960. The number of children living in stepfamilies, which have also been cited in the literature as blended, reconstituted, or remarried families, has increased 1.6% over the same period. Since 1960, there has been an 11.5% decline in the number of intact families, which are families containing both biological parents (Glick, 1979). These statistics clearly indicate that the number of stepfamilies in our society is on the rise.

A study (Parish and Dostal, 1980) was conducted to determine how children's perceptions of self varied according to the family structure in which they lived (intact, divorced remarried, and divorced nonremarried). They administered Parish's Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC) to 738 children ranging in age from 11-14 years. The results obtained from the study tended to indicate that children from both single-parent and stepfamilies (divorced nonremarried and divorced remarried) perceived themselves and their parents less favorably than did children from intact families. Their findings were significant at the .01 level. They reached the conclusion that children from single-parent and

stepfamilies tend to perceive themselves and their parents less favorably than do children from intact families.

In a similar study, Raschke and Raschke (1979) tested the hypothesis that family structure (i.e., intact, single-parent, or reconstituted) should have no effect on a child's self-concept. Their study involved 289 children in grades three, six, and eight. They used the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale to measure self-concept. No significant differences in self-concept scores of children from intact, single-parent, or reconstituted families were found. Their findings lend support to the proposition that "children are not adversely affected by living in a single-parent family, but family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is also a measure of social and personal adjustment" (p. 373).

The purpose of this study was to explore how this change in lifestyle (stepfamily, single-parent) may affect the children involved. After reviewing some of the research conducted on the different family structures and the children involved in them, and from observations in our own work places, we became interested in developing a better understanding of children's perceptions of themselves and how they might be affected by living in various family structures. We tended to believe that children from stepfamilies would not perceive themselves as positively as children from either intact homes or single-parent homes. This pre-research assumption was based on our observations that many children with whom we have worked seem to survive their parents' divorce but have difficulty adjusting to the second emotional jolt of becoming a

member of a stepfamily.

#### Method

Using the PAIC, students from the three different family structures were tested, hypothesizing that there would be no differences in how children from stepfamilies, single-parent families, or intact families perceived themselves. Additionally, differences in relation to sex and grade were investigated. Specific adjectives that children from the different family structures chose when describing themselves were also examined.

#### Participants

Participants were 214 students in grades 7 through 12 attending a university-related laboratory school which enrolls a cross-section of students regarding socio-economic backgrounds. Of the 214 subjects who participated, 199 (82 boys, 117 girls) provided data which could be used in the study. Nine cases were eliminated because of insufficient or unclear information; six were not included because the children were in a single-parent home as a result of parental loss through death and not divorce. This left a total of 199 subjects across the six different grade levels. There were 37 seventh graders, 18 eighth graders, 50 ninth graders, 51 tenth graders, 24 eleventh graders, and 19 twelfth graders. Of these students, 143 (72%) were from intact families, 24 (12%) from stepfamilies, and 32 (16%) from single-parent families.

#### Instrument

The Personality Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC) contains a list of 24 positive and 24 negative adjectives arranged in alphabetical

order. An example of some of the adjectives are angry, fairminded, complaining, and handsome. Children are asked to select 15 adjectives which best describe themselves.

In a study (Parish and Parish, 1983) utilizing the PAIC, 426 children from intact, divorced, and reconstituted families were asked to evaluate both themselves and their families by responding to the PAIC. It was determined that the choice of a particular adjective when describing oneself was related to family structure. They concluded that the 48 adjectives on the PAIC "provide a sensitive, multifaceted self-concept scale which can help to provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of children from various family situations, and thus may prove useful to parents, counselors, educators, and other helping professionals as a tool to better understand the children's needs" (p. 657).

Parish and Taylor (1978a) in a report concerning the validity and reliability of the PAIC, administered both the PAIC and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS) to third and sixth graders. They found a correlation of .67 ( $p < .001$ ) between these two scales.

#### Procedure

Subjects were asked to sign a consent form before beginning the experiment. The principal investigator read the form aloud and explained the rights of the students, which included confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked not to sign their names to the questionnaire, thus assuring anonymity. After consent forms were signed and collected, the testing instruments were distributed. Materials used in this study included a demographic

questionnaire structured by the researchers (see appendix A) and the PAIC, developed by Parish and Taylor (1978a, 1978b).

After completing the demographic questionnaire, subjects were asked to choose 15 adjectives that they believed best described themselves from the list of 48 included in the PAIC. The total time required for the completion of the study was approximately 20 minutes. Materials were immediately collected by the investigator.

The computer software package SPSS-X was used to analyze the data. A 3 X 3 (family structure X sex) factorial design analysis of variance was computed utilizing the .05 level of significance.

#### Results and Discussion

No statistically significant differences in how children in the three different family structures perceived themselves were found. Although students from stepfamilies tended to check fewer positive adjectives on the PAIC ( $\bar{X}_{sf} = 11.58$ ), their means did not differ significantly from the means of the children from single-parent families ( $\bar{X}_{sp} = 12.16$ ) or from the means of intact families ( $\bar{X}_i = 12.45$ ).

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Insert figure 1 about here

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Children from intact homes chose a slightly higher number of positive adjectives than the norm. Those from stepfamilies chose considerably fewer, and those from single-parent families fell at the norm.

The means found in this study also were similar to those found in Parish and Dostal's (1980) research. Although Parish and Dostal reported

statistically significant results between family structure and number of positive adjectives selected by children living in those various structures, they reported significance only at the .10 level of confidence.

These means were also similar to those found by Rankin and Parish (1981), who administered the PAIC to 1,050 children in grades five to eight from fifteen different school districts across Kansas. They found that those children overall chose an average (mean) of 12.24 positive adjectives when asked to describe themselves.

As verified in previous research (Parish & Dostal, 1980), an individual's sex seems to have no bearing on the number of positive adjectives checked in a self-evaluation. We, likewise, found there to be no significant differences in relation to the sex of the respondent.

An interesting difference was found to exist as a function of grade level. We found that the mean number of positive adjectives checked was

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Insert figure 2 about here

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lowest for students in the 9th and 10th grades. The 7th and 8th graders checked a mean number of 13.04 positive adjectives; 9th and 10th graders checked a mean number of 11.74 positive adjectives; and 11th and 12th graders checked a mean number of 12.65 positive adjectives.

We also identified adjectives actually chosen by children in each of the three family structures. The words marked by an asterisk were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level. For example, children from

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Insert table 1 about here

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stepfamilies chose lazy, mean, and dumb more frequently than did children from either intact or single-parent families.

However, a statistically significant ( $<.05$  level) difference, as measured by the PAIC, was not found in the overall self-concepts of children from step, intact, or single-parent families. This finding is in concert with that reported by several previous researchers.

#### Implications

Our society is inclined to view family structures other than the intact, nuclear family as potentially pathological. However, viewing the decline of the nuclear family as the cause of child pathology may be erroneous. Kurdak and Siesky (1978) suggest that the removal of tension and fear from the home environment subsequent to divorce may actually enhance child development. It is possible and even probable that many children of divorce and those who become stepchildren obtain strengths and maturities associated with their experiences.

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## Appendix A

## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Which of the following best describes the type of family you have lived with most?

\_\_\_\_\_ Your parents are not divorced and live in the same house.

\_\_\_\_\_ Your parents divorced, and you have had stepparents.  
Which parent is your stepparent?

\_\_\_\_\_ Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father

\_\_\_\_\_ Your parents have divorced, and the parent you lived with has not remarried.

Which parent have you lived with the most?

\_\_\_\_\_ Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. If you have ever lived with foster families, which of the following best describes the total time that you have lived in foster homes?

\_\_\_\_\_ A year or less.

\_\_\_\_\_ More than a year, but less than two years.

\_\_\_\_\_ Two years or more.

3. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What grade are you in? \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 1

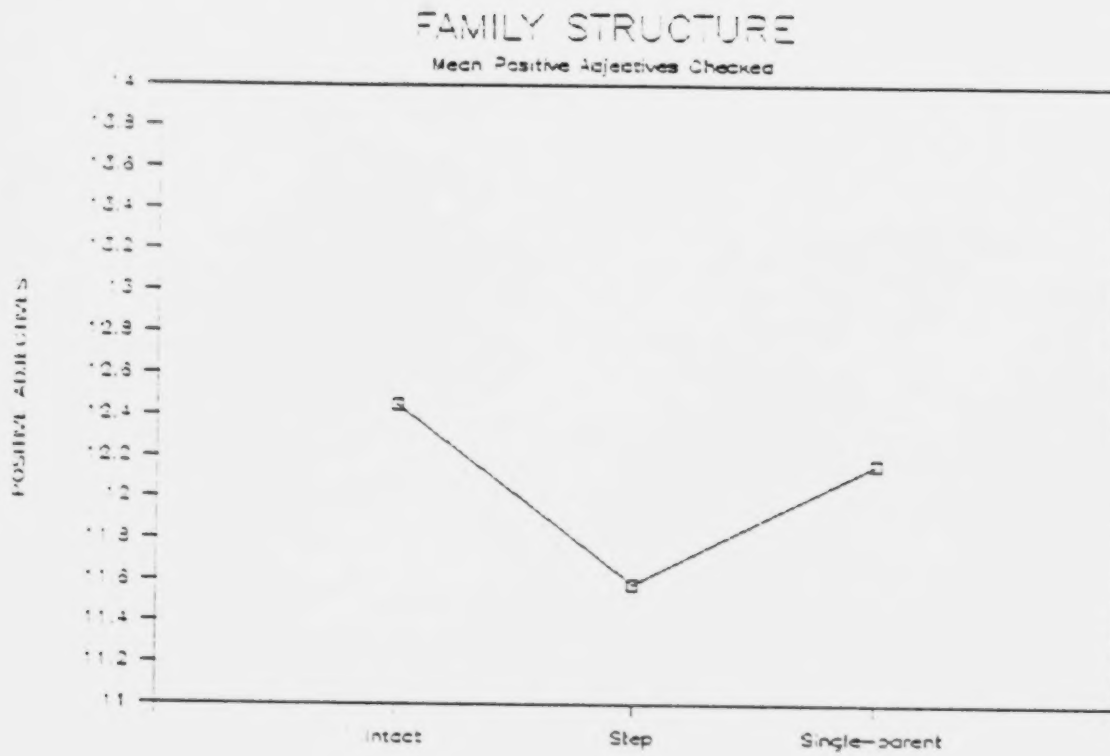


Figure 2

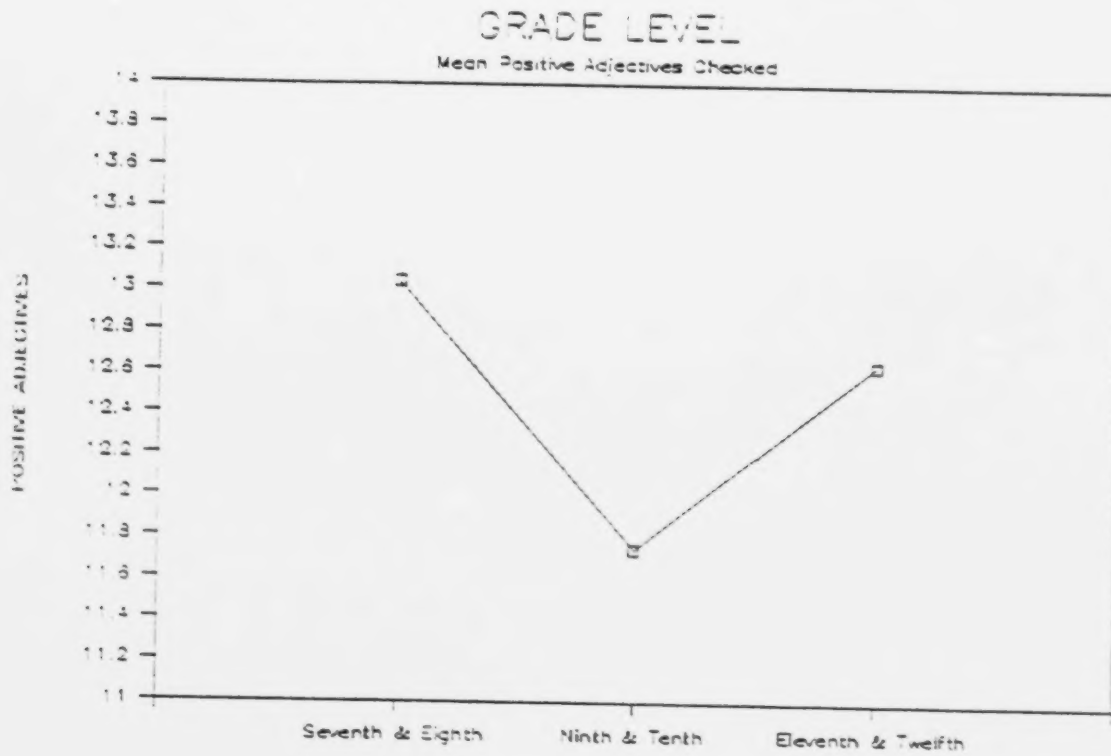


Table 1  
Percent of adjectives selected by children in the three  
different family structures

| ADJECTIVES  | INTACT<br>% | STEPFAMILY<br>% | SINGLE-PARENT<br>% |
|-------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| afraid      | 10          | 4               | 19                 |
| *angry      | 11          | 13              | 29                 |
| awkward     | 19          | 29              | 22                 |
| bad         | 3           | 4               | 3                  |
| beautiful   | 9           | 13              | 16                 |
| bitter      | 9           | 8               | 6                  |
| brave       | 36          | 46              | 28                 |
| calm        | 57          | 46              | 60                 |
| careless    | 24          | 38              | 13                 |
| cheerful    | 62          | 63              | 63                 |
| complaining | 24          | 17              | 28                 |
| cowardly    | 4           | 8               | 0                  |
| cruel       | 5           | 17              | 0                  |
| dirty       | 1           | 4               | 6                  |
| *dumb       | 2           | 13              | 3                  |
| fairminded  | 45          | 33              | 53                 |
| foolish     | 11          | 8               | 3                  |
| friendly    | 92          | 83              | 97                 |
| gentle      | 66          | 46              | 50                 |
| gloomy      | 11          | 8               | 22                 |
| good        | 62          | 60              | 66                 |
| great       | 29          | 33              | 16                 |
| greedy      | 11          | 17              | 6                  |
| *handsome   | 26          | 38              | 0                  |
| happy       | 72          | 67              | 66                 |
| healthy     | 81          | 71              | 72                 |
| helpful     | 78          | 75              | 68                 |
| honest      | 72          | 67              | 78                 |
| jolly       | 24          | 33              | 28                 |
| kind        | 77          | 67              | 69                 |
| *lazy       | 38          | 75              | 34                 |
| lovely      | 16          | 17              | 19                 |
| *mean       | 4           | 17              | 9                  |
| nagging     | 11          | 4               | 13                 |
| nice        | 77          | 67              | 69                 |
| polite      | 78          | 75              | 75                 |
| pretty      | 34          | 25              | 25                 |
| rude        | 4           | 8               | 6                  |
| selfish     | 15          | 4               | 9                  |
| showoff     | 24          | 17              | 9                  |
| strong      | 42          | 29              | 47                 |
| sweet       | 44          | 54              | 50                 |
| *ugly       | 3           | 13              | 13                 |
| unfriendly  | 3           | 0               | 0                  |
| *weak       | 5           | 17              | 0                  |
| wise        | 50          | 38              | 53                 |
| wonderful   | 29          | 25              | 22                 |
| *wrongful   | 0           | 0               | 6                  |

\*Significant <.05 level

## Effects of Family Structure

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Table 1

Percent of Children Who Chose Each Adjective on the PAIC

| Adjectives  | Family Type     |                  |                        |
|-------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------|
|             | Intact (n = 51) | Blended (n = 54) | Single Parent (n = 61) |
| Afraid      | 27.5            | 22.2             | 39.3                   |
| Angry       | 13.7            | 25.9             | 19.7                   |
| Awkward     | 11.8            | 9.3              | 13.1                   |
| Bad         | 5.9             | 14.8             | 14.8                   |
| Beautiful   | 21.6            | 14.8             | 19.7                   |
| Bitter      | 7.8             | 9.3              | 13.1                   |
| Brave       | 47.1            | 70.0*            | 50.8                   |
| Calm        | 59.8            | 38.9             | 49.2                   |
| Careless    | 21.6            | 18.5             | 14.8                   |
| Cheerful    | 58.8            | 46.3             | 59.3                   |
| Complaining | 21.6            | 16.7             | 27.9                   |
| Cowardly    | 2.0             | 3.7              | 8.2                    |
| Cruel       | 3.9             | 13.0             | 11.5                   |
| Dirty       | 2.0             | 0.0              | 3.3                    |
| Dumb        | 7.8             | 2.0              | 6.6                    |
| Fairminded  | 25.5            | 50.0**           | 39.3                   |
| Foolish     | 9.8             | 14.8             | 11.5                   |
| Friendly    | 92.2            | 90.7             | 86.9                   |
| Gentle      | 56.9            | 55.6             | 54.1                   |
| Gloomy      | 7.8             | 9.6              | 18.0                   |
| Good        | 66.7            | 46.3             | 49.2                   |
| Great       | 27.5            | 20.4             | 18.0                   |
| Greedy      | 5.9             | 13.0             | 18.0                   |
| Handsome    | 27.5            | 33.3             | 36.1                   |
| Happy       | 80.4****        | 59.3             | 52.5                   |

(Table 1 continues)

Table 1 (continued)  
Percent of Children Who Chose Each Adjective on the PAIC

| Adjectives | Family Type     |                  |                        |
|------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------|
|            | Intact (n = 51) | Blended (n = 54) | Single Parent (n = 61) |
| Healthy    | 72.6            | 70.4             | 75.4                   |
| Helpful    | 84.3            | 74.1             | 85.3                   |
| Honest     | 68.6            | 80.5***          | 57.4                   |
| Jolly      | 11.8            | 13.0             | 16.4                   |
| Kind       | 76.5*           | 57.4             | 55.7                   |
| Lazy       | 21.6            | 42.6             | 36.1                   |
| Lovely     | 25.5            | 24.1             | 18.0                   |
| Mean       | 7.8             | 13.0             | 13.1                   |
| Nagging    | 5.9             | 11.1             | 14.8                   |
| Nice       | 78.4****        | 66.7             | 50.8                   |
| Polite     | 60.8            | 68.5             | 68.9                   |
| Pretty     | 39.2            | 27.8             | 34.4                   |
| Rude       | 9.8             | 13.0             | 13.1                   |
| Selfish    | 7.8             | 3.7              | 13.1                   |
| Show-off   | 9.8             | 29.6             | 26.2                   |
| Strong     | 35.3            | 44.4             | 44.3                   |
| Sweet      | 58.8            | 46.3             | 50.8                   |
| Ugly       | 17.8            | 11.1             | 9.8                    |
| Unfriendly | 7.8             | 1.9              | 3.3                    |
| Weak       | 15.7            | 7.4              | 8.2                    |
| Wise       | 31.8            | 57.4***          | 42.6                   |
| Wonderful  | 35.3            | 29.6             | 27.9                   |
| Wrongful   | 5.9             | 3.7              | 0.0                    |

\*\*\*\* $\chi^2 = p < .01$

\*\*\* $\chi^2 = p < .02$

\*\* $\chi^2 = p < .03$

\* $\chi^2 = p < .05$